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ABSTRACT

This bibliography contains annotations of 11 journal articles, papers, and books examining different aspects of school budget elections. Entries include materials on voter behavior, the so-called "taxpayers' revolt," suggestions to school districts on how to win financial elections, campaign strategies, citizens' attitudes in school tax voting, and reviews of the research. All the materials included in this bilbiography were selected for their relevance to school administrators and are indexed in the ERIC system. (DS)

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The Best of ERIC

Clearinghouse on Educational Management

The Best of ERIC presents annotations of ERIC literature on important topics in educational management.

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This bibliography was prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management for distribution by the American Association of School Administrators, the Association of California School Administrators, and the Wisconsin Secondary School Administrators Association.

School Financial Elections

1. Alexander, Arthur J., and Bass, Gail V. *Schools, Taxes, and Voter Behavior: An Analysis of School District Property Tax Elections.* Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 1974. 79 pages. ED 132 654.

Although its discussion is restricted to a single—perhaps atypical—state, California, this document reaches some provocative conclusions about the idea that school budget defeats are part of a growing "taxpayers' revolt" against high taxes. According to this argument, a voter may resent all types of rising taxes and particularly the property tax, but "since the school tax referendum is the one place where he can vote directly on tax policy, he chooses to express his opinion in that forum." Thus the schools must bear the brunt of a general anger about taxes.

In the elections they analyzed, the authors found that "of the more than 50 variables we examined, the proposed tax rate, and its change, were dominant" in determining the fate of a measure. This overriding concern with taxes is not so much a recent phenomenon as the expression of a fundamental change in voter attitudes that took place some time ago. The authors suggest that "at some point between 1957 and 1966, the taxpayer revolted. His behavior changed at the same time the chief determinant of voter behavior—the taxes themselves—were growing larger."

The authors also found reason to hope that this "taxpayers' revolt," far from beginning, may actually be nearing an end. Specifically, they predict that in California the effects of a 1972 tax act, combined with declining school enrollments and rising property values, may lead to "a reduced need for property tax elections in the future as well as a likely decline in the cries of revolt."

2. Banach, William J., and Westley, Lawrence. "Public Relations, Computers, and Election Success," Paper presented at Educational Data Systems Association meeting, St. Paul, May 1972. 18 pages. ED 063 636.

Banach and Westley describe a method of planning for school financial elections, using "techniques that, collectively, will give you a 5 to 1 chance of winning the next time you go to the polls." The authors suggest that there are seven basic steps to developing a successful campaign: "analysis, determination of needs, development of strategy, organization, finance, communication, and evaluation." Analysis—utilizing opinion surveys—should be "year-around or continual." For effective organization, the authors suggest using a network of committees under the overall supervision of a campaign coordinator. They recommend committees on finance, publicity, election logistics, voter registration, opinion surveys and community education, and data processing.

Historically, low voter turnouts have often meant approval of financial measures. Therefore, it is important that a campaign to increase voter turnout be aimed selectively toward potential school supporters. Members of certain groups are most likely to support school budgets; cards and files should be kept on such voters. In the actual election described, "over 70 percent of those in the 'yes' file voted." Because the measure passed, the authors conclude that "by defining audiences and tailoring campaign material to their needs, one can significantly affect election results."

3. Boss, Michael. *The Supply and Cost of Education and the Vote: A Political-Economic Theory of School Finance Elections.* Eugene: Center for Advanced Study of Educational Administration, University of Oregon, 1973. 37 pages. ED 082 371.

Despite an abundance of jargon, Boss's analysis of the school financial election process is both original and provocative. The traditional explanation for budget rejections is that they are caused by a "taxpayers' revolt" against the high price of education. Boss argues that cost is only one variable in a school election, which is a kind of marketplace transaction in which the voters (collectively acting as a consumer) decide whether or not the commodity being offered (the education the schools provide) is worth purchasing at the proposed price. Voters are likely to decide to buy when "the proposed supply of the public good is less than or equal to the median preference for that good." Conversely, if the proposed supply exceeds the demand, the voters are likely not to buy. The importance of cost is in helping establish the level of demand: "as the tax-price per unit of education increases," the demand will tend to decrease.

The notion that price interacts with supply and demand in determining how the voters respond to a proposed budget puts school election results in a different perspective. For example, close elections—or even budget defeats—"may indicate that the present systems of school finances are operating in a very desir-

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able fashion"; an evenly divided election indicates that the public is being asked to spend as much as it is willing to spend for the best education it is willing to purchase. This may mean that continued close elections are inevitable. But if there is no "taxpayers' revolt" per se, schools need not respond by reducing costs and cutting back on educational services. Instead, "there may be great potential for increasing individual and collective demand for education through improved educational packages that better satisfy the voter-taxpayers."

4. ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. ***School Financial Elections.*** Research Action Brief, Number 1. Eugene: University of Oregon, 1977. 5 pages. ED 140 434.

This review discusses its subjects from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Its first section concisely summarizes some of the most significant research findings about voting behavior in school elections. Many of the most important factors in shaping the voting decision, including "race, level of education, age, and economic status," are beyond the control of school administrators. The second section suggests "appropriate action school administrators can take to make the most of the challenge they face in securing voter approval of funds to operate the schools." It does this by focusing on some of the practical implications of the research findings.

Noting that schools must now actively work for voter approval, the review suggests that campaign efforts should be directed toward the most likely "yes" voters. The reason for this is that the school voting decision is relatively permanent, and few negative decisions can be reversed in a short campaign. In addition, since taxes are not always decisive in determining outcome, "cuts in school spending may not change the minds of many voters." Further, since parents, especially those of older students, are no longer particularly likely to support the schools, efforts to get them to vote may not be of much use either.

Schools should strive to avoid controversy, which is strongly linked to election defeats. A good way to do this is by working to improve communication between the schools and the voting public. As the document hopefully suggests: "School systems that consult the public about educational policy may well find that voters who feel that the schools are interested in their opinions all year, not merely at tax time, will not be so reluctant to pay the costs of quality education."

5. Falkinham, Ken. "Organized Work: The Road to a Successful Referendum." ***Phi Delta Kappan***, 57, 9 (May 1976), pp. 611-12. EJ 137 985.

Falkinham, noting that "America's school districts must deal with an increasingly obstinate electorate," outlines some strategies for facilitating passage of school financial measures. To begin with, schools should carefully analyze their needs. They should make certain that "all alternatives to tax increases or new building programs have been exhausted" and that "all avenues of expense cutting and/or building and room utilization have been considered" before submitting requests to the voters. When the election is called, "the public must be convinced that the Board of Education and the school administration are solidly behind the referendum."

Falkinham next outlines a plan to promote passage of the budget measure. His plan includes a careful publicity campaign and a concerted effort to get out the "yes" vote. But "what makes the plan different from other campaign tactics is its essential ingredient: small group presentations." Those who speak to these small gatherings should follow a precise outline designed to ensure "consistent, credible presentations." In this way, the same information will be disseminated at each meeting, the same points emphasized and not emphasized. The meetings themselves should be "informal, give-and-take, question and answer sessions."

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6. Hall, John Stuart, and Piele, Philip K. "Selected Determinants of Precinct Voting Decisions in School Budget Elections." ***The Western Political Quarterly***, 29, 3 (September 1976), pp. 440-56. EJ 148 082.

Hall and Piele conducted a study of voting behavior in Eugene, Oregon. They found that "house value was strongly . . . and positively correlated to positive voting." In addition, they found "positive voting by individuals with incomes in excess of $20,000. ' These findings may indicate "that higher income increases the capacity to pay taxes."

Another useful predictor of polling place voting was previous support for George Wallace. The authors suggest that a Wallace vote reflected a worldview that summarized many of the feelings attributed to "alienated" individuals. The study found that "support for Wallace and opposition to school budget elections

are closely related and cut across the class line reflected in house value."

However, "the single most significant indicator for predicting the outcome of school budget elections in Eugene" was previous polling place voting habits. The fact that the school budget election decision appears to be relatively permanent does not, of course, explain how that decision is made initially or why it might be changed: the authors suggest that these might be useful areas for further research.

If Hall and Piele's work is interesting for the factors it suggests do influence voting behavior, it is positively surprising for at least two factors it suggests apparently have no influence. The authors note that "there now appears to be substantial evidence to seriously question the long-standing belief that schools can look to parents rather than the general public for greater support in school financial elections." And while there was "some negative relationship between age and positive voting" (confirming the maxim that the elderly vote against school budgets), the correlation disappeared when house value was added as a control.

7. Jennings, Robert E. "The Effects of Tax Resistance." ***Phi Delta Kappan***, 54, 8 (April 1973), pp. 567-68. EJ 077 857.

Jennings points out that one reason for school financial election defeats may be simply "the reluctance of citizens to pay more taxes." Indeed, there need not even be any real objection to the financial measure being proposed; schools may be merely the victims of "voters' frustrations at their inability to directly affect taxing policies in other jurisdictions."

Often factors other than tax resistance help to determine the outcome of an election. The public may, for example, object to certain specific school policies; even the personalities of school officials may generate controversy. In addition, in bond elections there may be disagreements about the locations and designs of proposed school facilities.

Jennings reports on a study to determine the effects of taxpayer resistance in four suburban school districts. The study indicated that "tax resistance can form a solid bloc of opposition to funding proposals," but that this need not lead to the defeat of such proposals. A more critical problem is the presence of unresolved controversies in the election. Such controversies augment the relatively constant nucleus of opposition formed by tax resisters; thus "the more unresolved issues . . . the greater the risk of defeat." Tax resistance itself is probably impossible to eliminate, so schools should work "to isolate tax resistance through reduction of other controversies."

8. Jennings, Robert E., and Milstein, Mike M. "Citizens' Attitudes in School Tax Voting." ***Education and Urban Society***, 5, 3 (May 1973), pp. 299-319. EJ 078 893.

This article takes a broader, but no less insightful, look at the survey of voter attitudes discussed in Jennings. The study focused on four districts in suburban Buffalo, New York, that had recently held bond elections, two of which were successful. The authors found that most voters—negative as well as positive—expressed faith in local school boards and were relatively satisfied with the quality of education the schools were providing. Ironically, the authors speculate that such confidence in the schools might actually encourage negative voting among voters who feel that the schools are ***already*** doing a good job and therefore do not need any more money.

Even voters who are satisfied with the schools may vote against bond measures if they become concerned about specific issues. For example, in the two losing districts "building plans became centers of controversy." More generally, many voters in losing districts believed the proposals included too many "frills." As a result, they tended to question "the necessity of new educational features and the appropriateness of the architectural designs of the proposed facilities."

The tax costs of a proposal were often important in determining its fate. Some voters would oppose even desirable and reasonably priced facilities if they thought building them would cause taxes to increase. Less affluent voters were apparently most concerned about rising taxes; "the lower the (voter's) income, the more likely the tax bill was perceived as becoming excessive." This suggests that a voter's ability to pay a tax increase may be more important than the absolute size of such an increase.

9. Keith, Pat M., and Braito, Rita. "School Referenda: Directions for New Research." ***Education and Urban Society***, 7, 1 (November 1974), pp. 52-72. EJ 110 143.

Keith and Braito survey some of the research that has been done on voting in school financial elections. They conclude that "the 'empirical' research findings provide little or no direction for administrators undertaking the task of passing a financial proposal." One reason for this is that the findings themselves are so mixed. On some questions there is conclusive evidence. For example, it seems clear that "organized opposition by citizens, groups, and members of school boards tends to increase the likelihood of defeat of school financial issues." On other subjects findings are less consistent. Some studies indicate that the smaller a bond issue, the more likely is its passage, while others find no connection between an issue's size and its chances for passage.

Even more confusing is the evidence concerning the relationship between voter attitudes and voting behavior; in some cases "there are disparities between attitudes and voting behavior." Voters with unfavorable attitudes toward education are sometimes more likely to support school finance proposals than are those with more favorable attitudes. In general, "equating a 'no' vote with a negative evaluation" of the schools is not always justified.

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10. Kowalski, Joan P. Sullivan. ***Voter Behavior and Campaign Strategies in School Finance Elections.*** Arlington, Virginia: Educational Research Service, Inc., 1977. 50 pages. ED 140 383.

This research brief summarizes most of the recent work that has been done on school elections. The Educational Research Service describes the recent history of school finance voting, discusses some of the factors that influence voting behavior, and suggests campaign strategies that can be effective in promoting passage of a school money measure. Most of the material is not original, but this document is useful as a single source that includes a representative sample of existing information about school financial elections.

ERS's summary of "variables that are associated with favorable" election outcomes contains some thoughtful advice that school officials would do well to heed. How citizens vote depends in part on their perception of the superintendent or school board: "Voters who identify strongly with school officials" and "who believe their school officials are providing effective leadership" are more likely to "vote favorably for the schools." Instead of encouraging greater participation, districts should "take advantage of normal low turnout to recruit more voters who favor school issues." ERS also recommends that school officials "begin campaigns early; the longer the campaign effort, the more likely it is that the bond or tax issue will pass." Finally, because "voter behavior surveys indicate that a high information level was associated with positive voting . . . while the greatest negative voting was registered by those who thought there were no local needs," districts should work to communicate arguments for approving money requests. Such communication is best achieved through "encouraging community participation in school-related activities."

11. Piele, Philip K., and Hall, John Stuart. ***Budgets, Bonds, and Ballots: Voting Behavior in School Financial Elections.*** Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, D. C. Heath and Company, 1973. 220 pages. ED 137 989.

In this comprehensive volume, Piele and Hall catalog and evaluate the findings of nearly every significant empirical research study conducted from 1960 to 1973 of voter behavior in school financial elections. They note that voter behavior has changed markedly in recent years. The passage of a school financial measure, once little more than a formality, has become increasingly difficult. Since the mid-1960s, the consensus of the electorate "appears to have changed from a majority in support [of such measures] to a majority in opposition." Despite this shift, there is still general approval of and esteem for public education. In fact, there seems to be little connection between a voter's perception of the quality of public education and his or her voting habits.

The authors considered the relative importance of various factors in shaping the decisions of individual voters. They found little support for the theory that people vote out of simple economic self-interest. There is evidently "no significant relationship between relative issue cost and election outcome." Further, although homeowners are the group most directly affected by higher property taxes, the authors found "no statistically significant relationship between home ownership and voting for or against a school financial election."

Socioeconomic status may, however, influence voting; there appears to be a "strong positive relationship between income and educational attainment and positive voting in school financial elections." In addition, voting behavior may be influenced by how a person sees his relat[illegible]p to his community; "voters who are alienated are more [illegible] to oppose school financial issues than those who are not."

As public attitudes toward school financial measures have changed, so, too, have the best tactics for supporters of such measures to employ. Empirical support for the idea that the best way to secure approval is to "get out the vote" is "almost nonexistent." In fact, the authors suggest that a "general increase in voter turnout will produce a relatively greater representation of those less likely to favor school financial elections." Thus efforts should be focused primarily on those most likely to support the measure, typically on "young, highly educated, relatively wealthy white-collar workers."

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